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Glimpses at a Mystery Aircraft

Despite the technical revelations made concerning the breathtaking capabilities of the new YF-12A jet interceptor, known as the A-11 when first disclosed by President Johnson a few months ago, a great deal of mystery still surrounds the dart-shaped aircraft.

Reporters attending the Air Force briefing on the YF-12A sensed considerable restraint even in the technical revelations. What the Air Force told was indeed enough to mark the plane as a tremendous stride in air defense capability.

It was that the interceptor's speed exceeds 2,000 miles an hour in sustained flight, that its range is in excess of 3,500 miles and that its altitude is above 70,000 feet. It pointed out that, armed with 800-pound, radar-directed nuclear missiles, it would have an effective striking radius more than four times as great as the best current fighters. Since the missiles, which travel at 4,000 miles an hour, can be directed either upward or downward, to the right or to the left, the actual air space a YF-12A crew could control would be 25 times greater than that of present fighters.

But newsmen saw in the graphic information presented evidence that the plane might have an operational speed of near Mach 4—four times the speed of sound—rather than Mach 3 as announced, and that its

altitude could be in excess of 100,000 feet.

Another question concerned the aircraft's original purpose. Some observers believe the Central Intelligence Agency initiated work on the plane as a successor to its U-2 reconnaissance aircraft and that the Air Force got interested in it as an interceptor only later. A new reconnaissance plane, RS-71, seems to support the theory, because it appears to be an adaptation of the same design.

But still another question hovers over this remarkable advance in aircraft technology. And that is the question of whether it will ever be built in numbers and deployed as the Air Force apparently envisions. Its effectiveness evidently would be limited or nil against intercontinental ballistic missiles. Though it would drastically reduce the threat to the nation from enemy manned bombers, it remains to be seen whether Defense Secretary McNamara will regard this threat as serious enough to warrant spending the billions it would cost to obtain the new aircraft in quantity.